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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR TRAVELS TO MOROCCO'S DESERT SOUTH

¶1. Summary: Ambassador traveled to Morocco's southeastern province of Errachidia December 6-9 to review USG assistance programs in the area and explore ways the Government of Morocco might use Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) funding to generate income and employment in the overwhelmingly rural desert region. Ambassador dedicated a USAID education project, spoke with the local chamber of commerce, inaugurated a girls' dormitory built with Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) humanitarian assistance funds, met with a think tank, visited a Peace Corps volunteer site and toured desert and oasis agriculture with Ministry of Agriculture officials. The trip allowed the Ambassador to explore how the USG can best promote economic development and reform in Morocco's desert regions and gave him the opportunity to discuss with local political and economic leaders their priorities and expectations of programs like the MCA and the U.S.-Morocco Free Trade Agreement. Ambassador was deeply impressed by the existing development efforts of local leaders and optimistic for the success of MCA assistance to the area in conjunction with the GOM's National Human Development Initiative (INDH). MCA assistance in funding the INDH was mentioned by interlocutors at nearly every event, indicating the high hopes that Errachidia officials have in both programs. The visit received wide coverage from French and Arabic-language press. End Summary.

¶2. The province of Errachidia covers more than one-tenth of Moroccan national territory. It is bordered on the north by the mountains of the High Atlas, and extends south as a vast dry plateau onto the Sahara desert. Errachidia's 600,000 inhabitants are mostly engaged in small-scale desert agriculture in and around the region's three desert oases, which once formed part of a historical caravan trade route from sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean. Tourism in the area is centered on the famed sand dunes of Merzouga, frequently used as a movie set for Hollywood productions.

REGIONAL LEADERSHIP ON SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

¶3. Ambassador began his trip December 6 with a call on the Wali (regional governor) of Meknes-Tafilalet, Hassan Aourid. Aourid, a former Palace spokesman and classmate of King Mohammed VI, listed water management and human capital development as two of his top priorities for the region. He noted the importance of olive oil production but said palm dates could become even more profitable than olives if technologies used in Israel and the Emirates could be adopted and the "archaic" ways of production currently used in Morocco be abolished.

¶4. Aourid said tourism could also be profitable, but lamented what he considered limited transportation options and "serious security problems." Aourid explained that when he became Wali the crime rate was very high and pockets of Salafiya Jihadiya terrorists remained at large. While these issues have been largely dealt with, he said, security continues to pose a problem.

¶5. While Aourid was not surprisingly unfamiliar with the MCA, he gave his views on the King's Human Development Initiative (INDH), emphasizing that it is not intended as a charity program, but rather will be a way to help people to help themselves. In the Meknes region the INDH will support olive oil cooperatives and handicrafts. In closing, the Wali reiterated his request for U.S. assistance on water management, to include meetings with technical experts on the issue. The Ambassador explained that the MCA would be important in this regard as technical experts would work closely with the regions as they develop their projects. The Wali thanked the Ambassador for his provision of English-language scholarships in Meknes and said he'd like to see the program expanded to other parts of the region.

¶6. Following his call on the Wali, Ambassador sat down with Meknes mayor and member of the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) Aboubakr Belkora. Belkora was accompanied by several commune representatives, all affiliated with the PJD. Ambassador announced that Belkora had been selected for an International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) and said he hoped that Belkora could participate in this three-week exchange program. Belkora said the invitation was an honor for him and his party and emphasized his desire to have a closer relationship between the PJD and the Embassy. The PJD strives to be a party of "good governance and tolerance," he said, and is grateful to

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have the support of others to help it achieve these objectives.

¶7. Belkora was also unaware of the MCA, but echoing Aourid, said his two main priorities are developing agriculture - particularly water management - and tourism in the Meknes area. Belkora described his vision for creating a tourist destination in Meknes based on the concept of Disney World, and introduced the Ambassador to a group of young Moroccan professionals who are working with Moroccans in Orlando to create this "Meknes Disney." The mayor said he had already been in contact with U.S. officials regarding the possibility of assistance (NFI) for this project which he said would go a long way toward alleviating poverty in the Meknes region.

ASSISTING EDUCATION THROUGH USAID AND ODC

¶8. In the desert mining town of Rich, Ambassador dedicated three girls' dormitories built with Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) Humanitarian Assistance funds. The dormitories house girls from far-flung rural villages where no secondary schools exist. The dorms house 48 girls each, allowing them to attend school. Ambassador delivered remarks to an audience of 150 teachers, students and local officials, and presented plaques to the directors of each of the three dormitories.

¶9. On December 7, Ambassador inaugurated a USAID-funded multimedia lab at Moulay Rachid middle school in Errachidia. The visit brought out local authorities, members of civil society and parents to celebrate the inauguration of the media lab, established with the support of the USAID ALEF Project. The laboratory comprises ten computers networked through a local server to the internet and is part of a larger initiative of USAID to support the Government of Morocco in its recently launched effort to equip all 8,600

of Morocco's primary and secondary schools nationwide. The ALEF Project's main contribution is to develop and pilot materials and strategies to train teachers on information and communication technologies, to strengthen the quality and relevance of their instruction. School administration has crafted a schedule that ensures all 40-plus teachers bring their students to the lab at least once a week.

A PROUD BERBER HERITAGE: DISCUSSION WITH THINK TANK TARIK
IBN ZYAD

¶10. Ambassador met with members of the Centre Tarik Ibn Ziyad think tank on December 7 to gain insight into the cultural heritage of the region and explore ways in which programs like the Government of Morocco's INDH and the MCA might be most effectively used to the benefit of the region. The Centre Tarik Ibn Ziyad was founded in January 1999 by the Wali of Meknes-Tafilalet, Hassan Aourid, and receives the bulk of its funding from the King's Mohammed V Foundation for Solidarity.

¶11. Ambassador received presentations on the archeological and cultural heritage of Errachidia province and learned of its historical role as the geographical origin of the Alaouite dynasty. Presentations detailed the center's involvement in the development of Errachidia province; the mosaic of peoples and traditions in the region; the historic role of the medieval city of Sijilmassa as a stop on the Sahara caravan route between Tangiers and Timbuktu; the oasis ecosystem; and the status of rural women.

ERRACHIDIA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

¶12. At a working lunch hosted by Errachidia Chamber of Commerce president Mohammed Belhassan, Ambassador discussed the obstacles facing small town business leaders in an isolated desert region. With virtually no large-scale industrial production, business in Errachidia consists almost exclusively of small-scale distribution and tourism services. In the absence of any manufacturing or agribusiness, and lacking access to international gateways due to the region's isolation, Errachidia stands to gain little from Morocco's free trade agreement with the United

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States. Business owners sought English language training and links with U.S. chambers of commerce to share expertise through exchange programs and reciprocal visits.

PEACE CORPS SITE VISIT

¶13. Ambassador paid a visit to two Peace Corps volunteers in the town of Tinjdad, 40 miles west of Errachidia. The volunteers showed the Ambassador their work in the areas of small business development and youth development, and discussed some of the difficulties small artisans have in marketing and distributing their wares. The Youth Development volunteer teaches English as an after-school activity and conducts a Youth Cafe in the evenings which offers young girls and boys an opportunity to learn more about America. The Small Business Development volunteer assists local artisans with marketing and profitability assessments.

¶14. The Ambassador also visited a local family's home that has played host to three previous Peace Corps Volunteers. The Ambassador's visit to this small and isolated community became a major event that gave deserved recognition to both the Volunteers living there and the

community leaders who are supporting and working with them.

OASIS AGRICULTURE: ERRACHIDIA'S SINE QUA NON

¶15. A desert region, Errachidia would not support any appreciable population were it not for the three oasis valleys that run the length of the province. Ministry of Agriculture officials took the Ambassador through the largest of these, the Ziz Valley oasis, to demonstrate the importance of desert agriculture to the region and the difficulties local producers face due to water scarcity. Ambassador toured oasis plots of small-scale subsistence agriculture, consisting mostly of date palms, olives and alfalfa; saw how water is gathered and distributed through an ancient system of underground canals called "khattaras," and learned how the region faces encroachment of the desert into production areas. Ambassador discussed how MCA funding can be most effectively used within the context of the INDH to generate income and employment for the region.

¶16. At a wrap-up press conference in the city of Erfoud, Ambassador detailed for the 12 print and TV journalists present his impressions of existing development efforts in the region and how MCA funding can be used to improve conditions. Press questions focused on the U.S.-Morocco bilateral relationship and the level of U.S. assistance to the region of Errachidia, particularly in the fields of agriculture, health care, job creation, and education.

¶17. Press and broadcast coverage of the Ambassador's visit to Errachidia was ample. On December 8, Agence Maghreb Arabe Presse (MAP) issued a story on the visit which appeared in several local dailies. In addition, on December 11, Arabic-language daily Al Alam (circulation 55,000) published an article entitled "The U.S. Envisages Increased Support for Revenue-Generating Projects in Morocco." Government-run, French-language television station RTM (viewership 30 million) aired on its prime time news program excerpts from the Ambassador's dedication ceremony at the Rich dormitory for girls, as well as his inauguration of the USAID-funded multi-media laboratory at the Moulay Rachid Middle School. The same day, French-language daily Le Matin published a favorable article under the title, "Ambassador Riley in Errachidia."